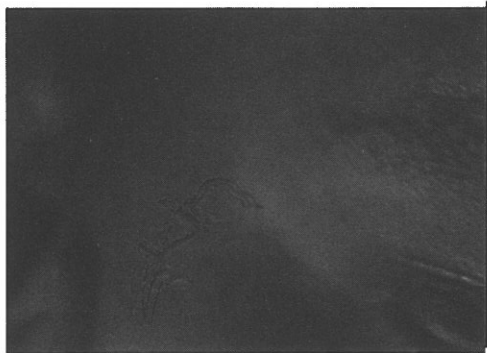




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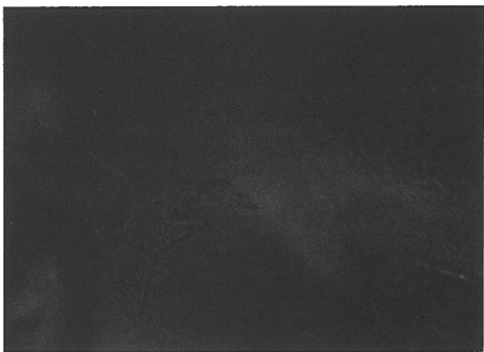
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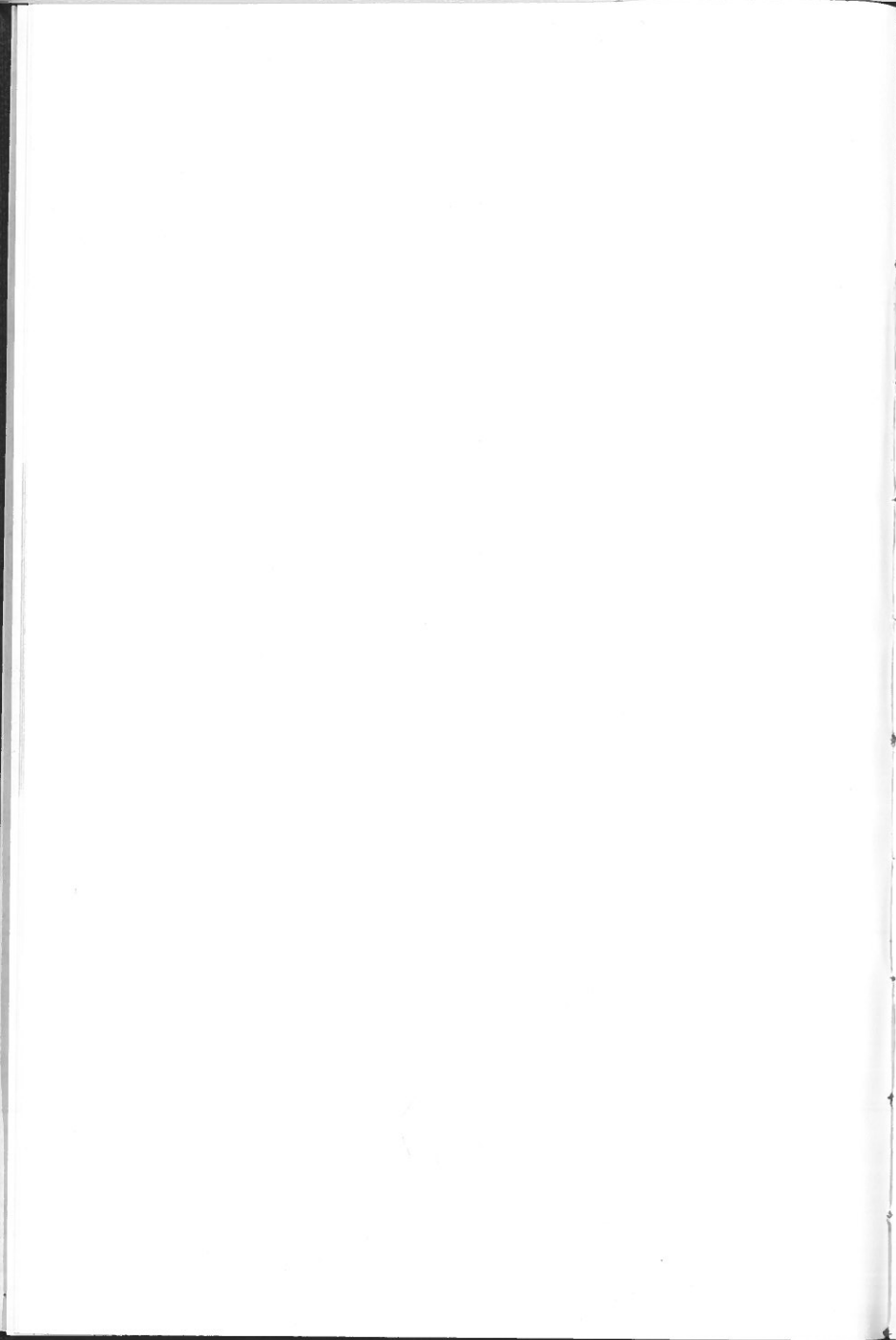
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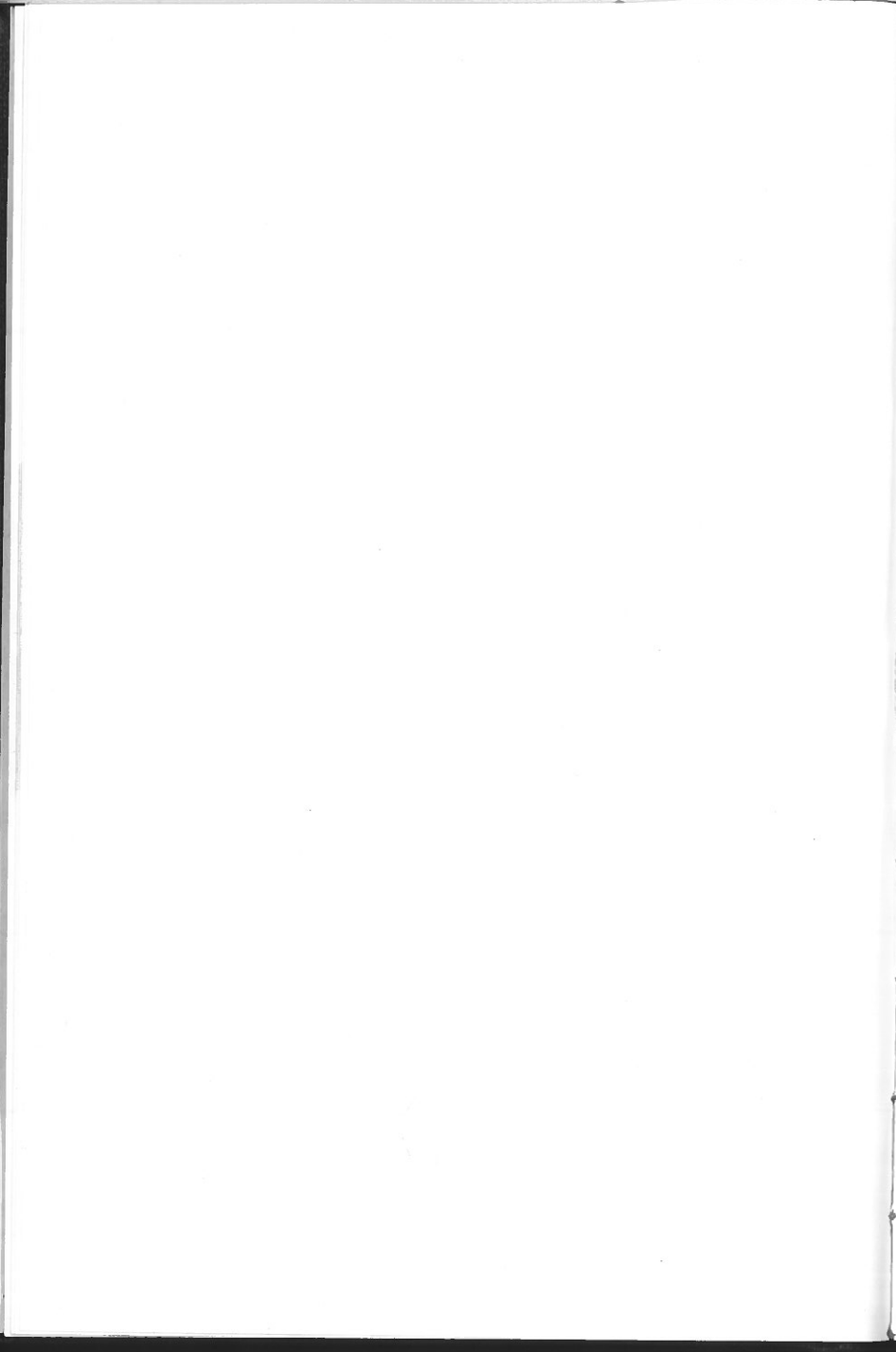
*to mama  
for the faith  
to indygo  
for the hope  
to my family  
for the greatest of these*





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## Introduction: Oceanic mothering

Drisana Deborah Jack's second book, *skin*, is a wonderfully sensual, fluid, and powerful collection of poetry, born out of what Antonio Benitez-Rojo identifies as the Caribbean's "unpredictable flux" and flows. Brimming over with images of oceanic wombs spiraling like the Milky Way, her poems resound with the pounding rhythm and rhyme of the ocean. She foregrounds salty fluidity and diasporic mothering in a complex body of poems, which insist on the Caribbean as a space of gendered "change, transit, return," inextricable from the larger, restless African diaspora as it is continually reborn.

As one of St. Martin's leading poets, Drisana Deborah Jack carefully situates her work within the unique history of her island nation and its location within the Caribbean. The collection begins with the moving gesture of claiming her homeland (which is still a French and Dutch colony) via its opening words of "my country" ("waterpoem 1"). These first words of the first poem alert us to the importance of place in the consolidation of self. But before we have time to imagine such a belonging to be simple and nostalgic for the Black diasporic subject, "waterpoem 1" shows belonging not to be a

birthright but rather a practice of reclamation. For the poet, to belong means a continual negotiation and re-negotiation of arrivals and departures.

Jack's suggestion of "reluctant arrival" and "resolute departure," immediately maps out a diasporic world where enslaved captives were brought from Africa to the Caribbean, disembarking against their will. This "first" arrival is overlaid with other subsequent deracinations, as the Caribbean has become host to wave after wave of immigration, fueled by (post) colonial exploitation and underdevelopment. Indeed, Jack teaches and works in both the USA and St. Martin, occupying the perilous "space in-between" as she travels from home to home, a theme further developed in "subway musings." "waterpoem 1," instead of mourning these relocations as the poet does in the Haiku-inspired "alovepoemaboutyouforme," quietly acknowledges the reclamatory practice of making home. Jack makes new dwellings in the "need for solace" and "interruption." She then asserts that these in-between spaces that encompass a history of arrivals and departures are her home and the places from which she writes "of the drowning of weeds / the nourishing of seeds" ("a poet's farewell").

The quiet voice of the first poem gives way to the fierce roar of the next poem entitled "en memento mori."

One of the best poems of the collection, "en memento mori" rips apart any complacency about arrival and departure, revealing the horror and brutality around forcible deracination and migration. The poem is located at the crossroads between African and European forms—a Yoruba prayer/chant and the classic European *memento mori* poem. As such, Jack highlights the syncretic cultural heritage of diasporic Africans, showing that out of the violent clash of cultures, a new people were born. *Memento mori* translates from the Latin to mean "Remember you must die" or "Remember that you are mortal." The term was used in classical antiquity as a way to encourage people to live life to the fullest. It was appropriated in the Christian context to suggest the fleeting and illusory nature of earthly pleasures and the necessity for morality. If the pleasures of this earth were empty, one needs to focus only on the afterlife, on the fate awaiting one's soul. Traditional *memento mori* examples include still-life paintings (which originally included symbols of mortality such as a skull or a time piece) and funeral art such as cadaver tombs, which de-

picted the decayed corpse of the deceased.

Jack might have first encountered the term *memento mori* at the center of a major T-crossing—midway between her mother's village of Cole Bay, her high school in Cul-de-Sac, and Philipsburg, capital of the southern part of her island. The words are welded on the relatively small iron gate of one of the island's largest burial grounds. Hardly visible to the speeding traffic or even to those walking by, but to the then "sullen girl / not unhappy / just ... deep blue" the term was sighted as a mystery, a language and a meaning to unearth. There are four conventions of the *memento mori* poem that Jack subverts in significant ways: 1. the prevalence of the fear of death, 2. the use of images/metaphors of death to remind a sinner that his body would decay, 3. the repudiation of sin alongside a reaffirmation of faith, 4. a succession of awful images "dwelling with insistent horror upon the corruption of the body, the terror of the grave, and the punishment of that greater pit into which an unprepared soul might fall" (Morris, 1035).

The poet begins her "en memento mori" with one of the ultimate symbols of death for children of the diaspora—the slave ship with slaves "coming coming in the belly of vessels of

greed / packed on the shelves forced intimacies." However, at the beginning of the poem, this image of death is not used to remind us of our mortality. Rather, it recalls the living presence of "those who came before," our enslaved ancestors who survive death by our acts of remembrance.

Jack reworks Christian notions of mortality and the afterlife by showing the ancestors to be living forces that crisscross the boundaries between the living and the dead. In keeping with traditional Yoruba and other African beliefs, the ancestors are alive as long as we pay homage to them, as long as we recognize their continued presence in our daily lives. The third stanza insists on their return, this time not in the belly of slave ships, but rather in the form of hurricanes. "en memento mori" asserts that hurricanes are ancestral presences that "come like a righteous anger embracing Yemanja / raising her up and reigning her on our heads." The period of their arrival across the Atlantic coincides with the hurricane season as they reign (with its obvious pun on the salty rain that accompanies hurricanes) on our heads.

Instead of the melancholic tone that pervades the traditional *memento mori* poem, the anger, resistance, joy and raw power of ances-

tral freedom songs permeate throughout. We get images of various African peoples and the cultural forms forged in the Caribbean such as the Ouatouba, Bamboulay, and Ponum, resisting the "massa" through their song, the burning down of plantations, the grinding of their hips. We see this resistance being passed down from mother to mother, worked into braids like hair grease, transmitted generationally in the acts of emancipation and independence that honor the flight of those with wings.

In "en memento mori," the homage to our African ancestral legacy is achieved via images of survival, resistance, and emancipation and by way of various stylistic devices. The images in each verse are followed by the Yoruba phrase *axé* (pronounced *ashé*), giving the reader a sense of the poem as incantation, meant to be spoken out loud. According to Joseph Murphy in his book *Santeria*, "The sacred world ... is motivated by ashe [*axé*]. Ashe is growth, the force toward completeness and divinity ... Ashe is the absolute ground of reality. But we must remember that it is a ground that moves and, so, no ground at all" (Murphy, 130). *Axé* is also said after a statement to mean "so be it." Jack thus continually evokes a divine moving energy, a prayer that punctuates each



verse like an amen. One can think of each *axé* as a response to the call of the verse, an answer that resounds across life and death.

The poem contains references to Yoruba gods or Orishas such as Yemanjá and Oshun. The Yoruba and their diasporic children believe that Olodumare is the Supreme Being aided in ruling by the Orishas, a pantheon of deities. These deities are associated with different elements and parts of the universe, such as the wind, the ocean, and the river. Yemanjá is the ultimate personification of motherhood, represented by the maternal pull and flow of the ocean. She has, for obvious reasons, acquired greater import to those who survived the Atlantic crossing than those in Africa and is often thought of as the womb of the diaspora. She is associated with dyeing blue cloth, an image that reappears in Jack's "motherlines or breast-feeding the diaspora," "blue water / blue movement / blue tears / blue screams / dreams of tidal blue ... indygo child / a deeper shade of blue / a deeper shade of blues." Oshun, the Orisha of love and beauty, is often represented by the river. In the poem, men whisper "the words of Oshun to their women / making rivers run, caressing fingers," for love and birthing in the context of violence, the poet seems to

argue, is part and parcel of our struggle for liberation. The notions of love, birthing, and mothering that appear in this poem resound throughout the collection, convincing us of the political importance of acts that are often relegated to the realm of the private and personal. In "foremothers," Jack continues to show the personal as imminently political, insisting that freedom arises from saliva, amniotic fluids, locked knees and "the silent resistance / of a dinner uncooked."

The last two verses of "en memento mori" sound a warning, lest we become too comfortable in our victory over death and injustice. The poem assumes the ominous tone of a traditional *memento mori* poem by reminding us about the nearness of death. This is not an earthly death of the body but rather a death of freedom caused by apathy. Jack warns those who have survived the slave ship and plantation of the danger of taking freedom for granted. She insists that such apathy that allows sacred sites to become home to weeds will result in us passing away, our nations unclaimed. Freedom, she tells us, "has never been a gift."

Jack's introduction of Yemanjá acquires even greater significance in light of the theme of mothering in *skin*. The notion of mothering

has many faces throughout the collection—biological mothering, motherland, Mother Africa, mothernation St. Martin, mother tongue, foremother, ocean as mother, and poet as mother. Given the history of slavery in the Caribbean, in the Americas, where Black women's children were often sold away from them, and where they were forced to take care of the masters' children, the relations of Black women to mothering are haunted by loss and non-biological acts of caretaking. It has also been shaped by historical depictions of Black women as mammies, matriarchs, and welfare queens in stereotypical distortions of mothering. Black women "encounter these controlling images, not as disembodied symbolic messages but as ideas that should provide meaning in our daily lives" (Collins, 92).

Through her various poems, Drisana Jack wrenches the meaning of motherhood away from dominant perceptions to create new types of mothers who first and foremost give birth to themselves ("this little light of mine"). Jack moves beyond prescriptive biological roles of mothering, as giving birth and nurturing children assumes larger metaphoric significance within the global patterns of (post) colonial motion. She develops these ideas most fully in

"motherlines or breast-feeding the diaspora," where she poignantly insists that "the presence of love is greater than / the absence of the body." Here she redefines motherhood to include those women "who have had to / cut their children loose / give them up to the care / of un-natural mothers." Through the story of the poet's family where daughters are raised by their grandmothers, Jack shows different ways to nurture and raise children that exceed traditional roles of mothering. To be a mother, she poignantly depicts, is about a lineage of Black women who redefine the role of motherhood to allow for new meaning—"I will let you go again / as it has always been / and you must let me go / as it must be."

Jack's depiction of the cycle of her family immediately conjures up the idea of Mother Africa whose stolen children are raised in the New World by other mothers. The poems demonstrate the omnipresence of Africa for dispersed peoples. For the Caribbean immigrant living elsewhere, the idea of absent mother (lands) has added meaning. One need only look at literature by Caribbean writers such as Michelle Cliff, Paule Marshall, Joan Riley, and Jamaica Kincaid to see how the protagonists' relationships to their mothers are directly paral-

lel to their relationships to the absent motherland from which they have immigrated. Physical estrangement from one's home and mother produces the same alienating effects for these characters—they often feel loss, despair, and rage. Annie in Kincaid's *Annie John* feels unhappiness so palpable at the separation from her mother and her home of Antigua that she claims to be able to see it when she closes her eyes: "it took the shape of a small black ball all wrapped in cobwebs" (Kincaid, 84).

Jack does not deny the loss and the pain of separation from mother and motherland but her depiction of a world of multiple (fore)mothers, all of whom step up to nurture and nourish their daughters at various times, reflects the resiliency of Caribbean peoples. Thus, in "memory lapse" when she claims that her mother fills "in blanks I've left / in my daughter's memory," she re-affirms the vibrancy of a diaspora dealing with multiple dislocations and separations, for what one mother(land) cannot provide, another can and will.

*skin* begins and ends with the major trope of the work—water. Almost every poem portrays oceans, tides, amniotic fluid, tears, landlocked rivers, salt ponds. Jack's five waterpoems speak directly to the St. Martin landscape. In "water-

poem 2," she compares the lush promise of her youth with the tidal seduction by ocean caresses of Soualiga (an Amerindian name for St. Martin which means Land of Salt). Jack warns us in the opening lines that this oceanic intimacy is now only a memory, but this does little to prepare us for the abrupt switch from caress to the violent fists of a storm in "waterpoem 3" and its aftermath in "waterpoem 4." Tidal romance gives way to "heaving water" and "submerged streets"—we are placed directly in the path of a hurricane that flays, drowns, and destroys. The Caribbean, Jack tells her readers, is not the pastoral paradise depicted in the tourist brochures. Behind idyllic images, lies the bite of history, of those enslaved Africans brought to St. Martin to mine salt in the Great Salt Pond who revisit and wreak the vengeance for continued injustice.

Throughout Jack's written and visual work (in particular her visual installations "The Blowing Season"), one finds this notion of hurricanes as ancestral presences raining on our heads. Jack calls hurricanes a "seasonal remembrance," a way for those ancestors who did not survive the Middle Passage to construct a memorial for themselves out of wind, sea, and salt. In an interview with Jacqueline Bishop, she states that

the idea arose when she was studying satellite maps of hurricanes and saw how they "travel [...] from Africa and across the Atlantic to the Caribbean and ... how [*they*] go[...] to America, just like slaveships ..." (Jack in Bishop, 95). The first full verse of "a salting of sorts" alludes to these satellite maps when the poet writes that

... what we saw & see in re/play  
and re/wind  
couldn't be contained  
in sound/bytes and pixels  
in high definition video  
there is not enough resolution  
no understanding for this  
reclaiming ...

Just as we cannot fully contain the image of a hurricane using technology, we can never contain the furious re-memory of our ancestors as they revisit the Caribbean and the USA. Jack's recognition of hurricanes as ancestral forces, as "a flotilla of bodies / beached bloated blurred pixelated / adrift in a history still seeking remembrance" ("waterpoem 5") has particular resonance when one remembers that New Orleans, recently devastated by Hurricane Katrina, was one of the busiest slave ports in the New World.

This idea of ancestors appearing in salt and water extends to the notion of tears throughout

*skin*. Personal grief is always connected to the collective grief of the diaspora still feeling the effects of imperialism—"healing unknown hurts / all this salt needs a place to go / and my cup runneth over" ("bitter water"). *skin* ends with a moving testimonial to this collective grief by evoking the African-American spiritual, what W.E.B. Du Bois calls the "Sorrow Songs" of Black folk. Using lines from "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" and "Wade in the Water" as heart-rending refrains, Jack mourns the multiple displacements that have made refugees of children of the diaspora. The poem, like so many others in the collection, bears witness to the familiar tides that have carried slaves and their descendants to unknown shores and the "strange tides these days/ [*that*] wash our dead away" ("bitter water"). But housed in her grief are the veiled messages in the Sorrow Song. In its blending of African and New World musical forms, the Sorrow Song gives evidence to the diaspora's birth of new aesthetic forms that are blessings, prayers, and cleansings of the soul ("this poem"). It also belies the myth of Black peoples happy in their subjugation via veiled articulations about the suffering and desires of an oppressed people. But most importantly for Jack, "[t]hrough all the sorrow of the Sorrow



Songs there breathes a hope—a faith in the ultimate justice of things" (Du Bois, 213).

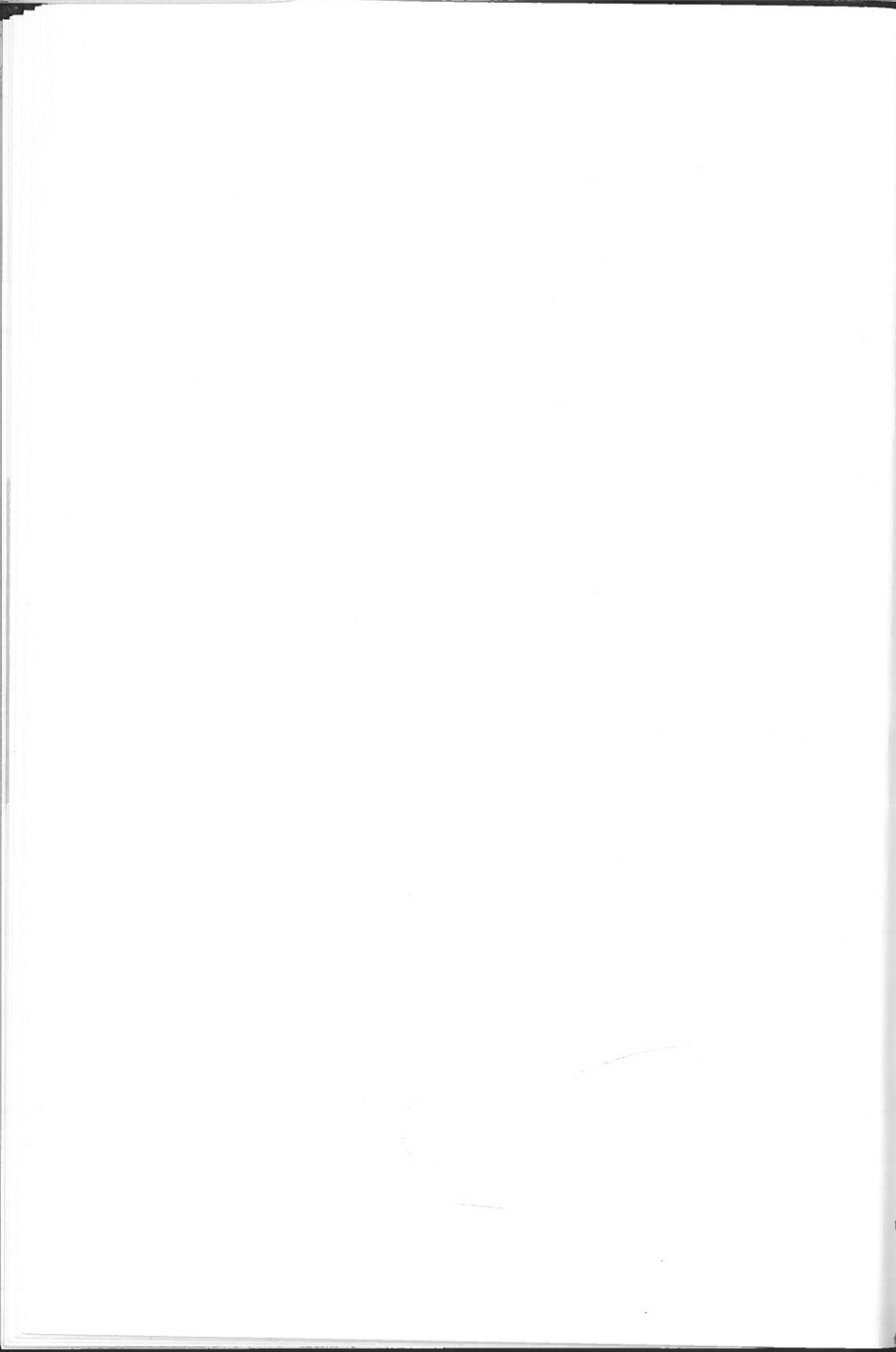
For Jack, even as it expresses the collective grief of diasporic children, poetry is about a call for justice. Poetry embodies the difficult spiritual, emotional, and political work that one does to communicate across physical and philosophical distances. It refutes the apathy that can make us take our current conditions for granted, and it warns others that the past is not yet over and the future has to be made. As it was in the beginning, Jack promises us, whether through hurricane or the caress of sea foam, "God's gunna trouble the water."

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## waterpoem 1

my country has no rivers  
yet i understand  
the pull of the sea  
the need for landlocked water  
to make its singular way to shore  
the collision of  
reluctant arrival  
with resolute departure  
the need for solace  
the need for interruption  
of/and the space in-between

## en memento mori

*en memento mori*

in remembrance of those who came  
before  
who made the crossing  
coming coming in the belly of vessels of  
greed

packed on shelves forced intimacies

*axé*

anger fear uncertainty condolence  
repulsion hunger desperation yearning  
shame fear anger  
chanting prayers to orishas carried under  
their tongues

*axé*

now they come like a righteous anger  
embracing Yemanjá  
raising her up and reigning her on our  
heads

tears too salty to drink  
from the first sunrise in June  
to the last setting  
in the 11<sup>th</sup> month of the year of our Lord  
lord

*axé*

she pays tribute to her offspring/ sprung  
from decks of despair  
the sick, the weakened,  
the dreamers, the economic excess  
thrown into her waiting embrace  
an answer to fevered prayers  
*axé*  
then new prayers are uttered in  
the Ouatouba, the Bamboulay,  
the Ponum  
busting chains with a shrug  
wuking up freedom  
in the grinding of hips  
arms swaying, fingers flickering flames in  
flamboyant abandon  
singing a brim song  
"ah be been a hearum  
buh massa been a hidum"  
*axé*

*en memento mori*  
we honor the mothers  
who greased our hair with resistance  
parting it with hope and patience  
braiding our story in royal rows  
this is for the women who kept

freedom warm between their thighs  
nestled in their breast, shuttered behind  
lashes

nourished by a veil of tears

axé

here's to men who would not see their  
women grieve

another day for children

ripped from arms

& lashed from wombs

men who would not see another brother  
quartered

refused to bring the shackles to hobble  
another's wings

axé

to men who whispered the words of  
Oshun to their women

making rivers run

caressing fingers

running waters birthing water birthing rivers

birthing passages middle passages

end passages the final passage

from enslavement

to emancipation

to independence

*en memento mori*

we wonder

why we must sacrifice

because freedom has never been  
a gift

*axé*

to view a sunset on our own terms

so our children love themselves for just or  
justice, not just so

so culture is not compromise

because destiny demands it

apathy is the alternative

because freedom has never been  
a gift

*axé*

if we don't our children will curse our  
name (they do already)

if we don't

we will anyway

die anyway

die

away

*axé*

*en memento mori*

national symbols lay unearth

sacred sites are home to weeds  
Freedom Path is a housing complex  
named after the plantation  
the Baobab keeps her mystery  
heroes' names are whispered  
a nation waits  
unclaimed



## foremothers

come  
let us kneel  
daughters of Lohkay  
grasp in our hands  
the soil  
of our land  
breathe it in  
smell the blood the toil  
the saliva  
the amniotic waters  
that flow  
in  
under  
ground streams  
press your ear to the wind  
hear the cries of our foremothers  
know that they were  
wild Women  
spitfires  
who hid sparks behind shuttered lashes  
keeping passions  
between locked knees  
who waged the silent resistance  
of a dinner uncooked

## waterpoem 2

i live on another island  
not my own  
locked in childhood memories  
me a girl green  
my island lush as well  
we were green together  
the smell of tomorrow was ripe  
bright like the sun  
over a Cole Bay road at noon  
  
when you were named Soualiga  
by the first-borne-here children  
salt foam smiling around a bright blue  
pond  
Great  
your smell cloaking the land  
the sea a lover whose caressing waves  
yearn for permanence/ communion  
you meet and retreat in  
a timeless seduction  
the moon an unwilling voyeur  
to your tidal romance

alovepoemaboutyouforme

i will not cry tonight  
i might not stop  
and tears are a bitter way  
to quench this  
particular thirst

## for a son ... seeking

a father leaves a son  
to be raised by  
an angry mother  
becomes

the boy  
that does not forgive  
becomes

the youth who sees  
betrayal as birthright  
becomes

the lover that  
does not trust  
becomes

the father who  
cannot  
stay

## subway musings

1.

there's not much to do on a  
subway ride except to travel  
synaptic corridors  
and look for enchantment  
in lost memories

2.

under/city streets breathe  
teem with the stuff  
of epics and haikus  
bits of conversations hang in the air  
where a distant sob  
argues with the recalcitrant  
sigh who lost his home  
years before his house

3.

in this city where  
dreams are born  
twice as many are lost

4.  
my unoccupied heart  
looks for a residence  
of her own  
with rooms painted ochre  
for warmth  
steelbound and encrusted with kosha  
for fortification

## saturday night

he looked like you  
in the dark  
so i danced  
with him  
the scent of the sea and onions  
cornered where his neck  
and shoulder merged  
into a resting place  
for my torn cheek  
he wuking up wetness  
with gentle gyrations  
my pores yawning to embrace his musk  
the place between my thighs  
weeps with longing  
the newness of him teases  
and you sleep  
confident that i  
actually stay  
in my place  
where you put me

## memory lapse

my mother is still  
more mother than  
Grandmother  
filling in blanks i've left  
in my daughter's memory



## on being home/sick

fireflies in the yard next door  
are all the illuminate  
this night  
no moon  
no stars  
no elusive headlights  
venture this rocky road  
now  
just the fire of flies  
and me  
beckoning the darkness  
in hushed tones  
to come closer

this little light of mine

our father who art in heaven  
how do we spell your name

*the light shone  
and the darkness  
did not understand*

some people shout at God every other  
day  
some people shout at God 5 times a day  
some people shout at God everyday  
on their knees

*the light shone  
and the darkness  
did not understand*

some people pray to God every other  
day  
some people pray to God 5 times a day  
some people pray to God every day  
with one eye shut

*the light shone  
and the darkness  
did not understand*

some people talk to God everyday  
some people talk to God 5 times a day  
some people talk to God once a day  
and  
lie

*the light shone  
and the darkness  
did not understand*

the names keep coming  
has anyone seen Jeff  
he worked on the 101<sup>st</sup> floor  
Olivia on the 90<sup>th</sup>  
brown hair, green eyes, 5 foot 6  
some  
one  
any  
one

*the light shone  
and the darkness  
did not understand*

lost families no longer  
wander ash tinted streets  
washed clean by rain  
washed clean by hoses  
washed clean by tears

still  
ash clings to the soles  
of a childless mother,  
a new widow,  
a confused orphan  
death is new to them  
an unfamiliar visitor  
ask women in Palestine how to grieve  
for a lost son  
ask women in Rwanda how to suffer  
for the loss of innocence  
ask women in Chile how to dance  
with the unseen  
ask women in Mississippi how to forgive  
men with masks  
ask the mama Diallo how to grieve  
for uniformed injustice  
welcome  
welcome to the world  
welcome to the rest of the world  
who said  
that giving birth to yourself  
would be easy  
our mother who art in heaven  
how do you spell your name?

## a song for AXUM

*(for Yolanda, Mosera,  
Youmay & Lydia)*

in the beginning there was fire  
the fire that brands itself to dreamers and  
poets  
makers, vessels of an idea conceived  
@ its moment in time

in the beginning there was earth  
embracing this embryo, weary footsteps  
mingling w/ tears, seed of wanting  
awaiting rebirth

in the beginning there was air  
the vehicle of sound, voices raised and  
hushed  
hammer beating out a rhythm something  
like a heartbeat)  
something like a song on the edge of our  
minds driving us  
mad with its familiarity and strangeness

smell of sweat rode the air the smell  
of change  
of revolution  
of fear  
of re-birth

in the beginning there was AXUM  
let the revelation begin.

## in remembrance

*(for Charles)*

You and i knew  
that losing paradise  
was a quiet war waged on the sleeping  
we understood that poetry  
could be and was its own kind of warfare  
the guerrilla type  
that words could get you killed if placed in  
the wrong order  
we understood that poets were warriors  
too

in the 3 a.m. stillness  
my home makes sounds  
that should have been settled years ago  
in this 3 a.m. stillness  
confessions are their own form of  
forgiveness

i didn't always understand your musings  
your crafting of words into sonnets  
your use of form and meter  
you did not understand  
my free verse

but we knew and  
understood the daily fall of words  
that ambushed our daydreams  
we bleed words  
dampening notebooks  
scraps of paper  
cocktail napkins  
the palm of our hands  
in tightly locked heart-rooms  
creating a third sacrament  
hoping that the words we've shared  
made us immune to inner betrayals  
  
they will call you weak  
i will color you sad  
the deepest sad  
alizarin crimson  
the words we dream  
keep the blanket of night  
tucked under our chins  
never over our heads  
... sometimes



the words we pray  
on bended knuckles  
satisfy a madness  
that claws our core  
and when they fail us  
there's nothing more

## the lovers

younglove and oldsoul  
went for a walk on a road  
footsteps  
melting in the dew moist ground  
the path alive with the smell of an earth  
refreshed  
after the rainy season

younglove said to oldsoul  
when i'm in a place where  
most doors are closed  
and the ones that open  
take me to places

i  
don't  
want  
to/go  
restore my  
soul

oldsoul dreams in words that embrace  
younglove  
on remembering  
our last season yet to come  
i dream of love

ripped from fecund earth and cast away  
(like so many weeds)  
of fingers twisted, gnarled  
from obsessive replanting  
of falling short  
and laboring long

younglove wonders  
how could you be so calm when  
old images stain this New World  
blood on blood on blood stain  
makes a pretty red  
ripe for sidewalk abstractions  
the blood  
the chalk  
a palm up-turned  
frozen/ a fist uncurling  
wanting a longer lifeline  
young blood/s/pitting bullets  
from between clenched lips  
fragments of teeth  
tufts of hair  
create an abstract  
that has never seen the caress of a brush  
hieroglyphics of hate  
chaos and colors

clothe abandoned structures  
notes from an angry scribe  
oldsoul lovesighs  
on remembering  
our last season yet to come  
i wonder if we loved  
with sincere imperfection  
our love  
the walls embracing  
the eye of the hurricane  
an embryo in embers  
and still finds itself wanting

so here's to us  
we feeble two  
we the bad hand dealt to  
the un-kept promise of flawless love  
a black heart  
a red club  
one to beat  
the other to bludgeon

## a salting of sorts

what if in the beginning  
the word was flesh  
&the flesh became salt

then what we saw &see in re/play  
&re/wind

couldn't be contained  
in sound/bytes and pixels  
in high definition video  
there is not enough resolution  
no understanding for this  
reclaiming of the salt of the earth  
to the sea

&it's always the children  
whose spirits are stronger  
whose souls are more prepared  
whose grip on the earth is fragile

&so mothers try to keep them  
ignoring the call of the ocean  
&the futility of this madness  
mothers who bargained with the salt  
to offer up one or two or five  
to save just one  
the salt of her womb

this unspeakable sacrifice of salt  
like in the beginning  
when the flesh was salt

even now/still the salt of a sea displaced  
works its way into the corners of my eyes  
&i see a man on his knees  
in the sand  
lighting incense to honor his ancestors  
who were his children last Sunday  
but that day we all looked for our gods  
in the debris

somewhere in the mass of graves  
the confusion of the missing  
among the tangle of limbs  
the wail of the living  
the whirl of relief  
we look for a place to bury our grief

somewhere in between  
the sharing of a bowl of rice  
the embrace of a stranger  
in the rising of the sun  
&the waning of the moon  
with the glow of funeral pyres  
&candlelight vigils on our faces

we become the salt  
we become the salt  
we become the salt

we become the salt  
&inherit the earth

## pieced together

remember?/remember/remember  
re  
member

that we were born  
with a mist of salt  
clothing our skin  
young crystals  
glistening under a blessing of sunshine  
tasting promise with  
the tips of our tongues  
ears tuned/turned to a southern wind  
that whispers  
truths we hoped to ignore  
seeking bliss in forgetting

remember/remember/remember  
remember  
re  
member



## legacy poem

and they will know  
we were here  
we the children of this salted land  
our hearts beating with the cadence of  
waves on shore

grains of sand  
making new constellations  
on the soles of our feet  
birthing a universe on our skin

a poet's farewell  
*(for Sonya)*

you made me understand that  
what we do  
is more than clever crafting of words  
and extended vocabularies  
this is about touch  
this is about telling  
this is a bout of worship  
this is about a soul in a rainstorm  
the drowning of weeds  
the nourishing of seeds  
this is about a remembered gesture  
an unconditional smile  
an uncompromising will

## seedlings

2 coffins seed  
my dreams  
little ones  
small with  
innocence  
lined with  
brushed cotton  
hibiscus petals  
thorns off a kosha tree

you and i  
there  
me digging up the graves  
of our ancestors  
making familiar room for  
new grief

ignoring artifacts                      *you offer no help*  
uncovered                      *hands busy at your sides*  
in this frantic  
turning of dirt  
i have no time to spare  
share  
for visitations  
not with newer histories to bury

this poem

this poem  
is a blessing  
is a prayer  
this poem is an exorcism  
a cleansing of the soul  
for new demons to inhabit

to the light and other  
things of quiet beauty

*(for Nick)*

some are like water  
deep still wide  
patient with un/intentioned grace  
just with being  
expansive like the tides

you look to the light  
and other things of quiet beauty  
& time the passing of the clouds  
on the hills  
& pause as their shadows  
sweep by in subtle rebellion  
but you wait  
sure of the return  
of un/interrupted light

### waterpoem 3

when storms spiraled overhead heaving  
water over shipwrecked reefs and sand  
banks and banking sand shifting cities  
makeshift cities  
a yard salted by rain wind flaying leaves  
and kosha needles inhaling the smell of a  
storm knocking on our horizon

## waterpoem 4

the sea is heavy  
with bodies  
overcast souls  
some walk  
seeking solace  
some walk with eyes open  
with eternal surprise  
deep 6-ing in the shallows of submerged  
streets

there is a sadness  
in the weightlessness of a body  
afloat  
displaced from the ground  
defying gravity and other  
manmade theories

maybe this is not the time for poems and  
love songs  
but sometimes  
a mouth needs to sing  
a throat needs to do more than wail  
eyes need to tear  
with the salt from within

## waterpoem 5

there is a sea inside me  
sprawling wide  
surface warmth  
unplumbed depths

the embrace of oceans  
is the love i know  
new currents chilled by  
the melting of icecaps  
soothe equatorial temperatures  
and still with the call of a sure horizon  
i crash into your eroding shores

there is a sea inside me  
witness to countless crimes  
i carry evidence in my belly  
Witness a flotilla of bodies  
beached bloated blurred pixelated  
adrift in a history still seeking remem-  
brance



## **motherlines or breast- feeding the diaspora**

the presence of love is greater than the  
absence of the body  
i believe  
the mothers i have known  
in fragile memories  
have known love  
have known loss  
have known me and now know you  
this bond is a cycle  
a circle not understood  
by passersby

first there is Mom  
mother of my mother's mother  
who outlived one daughter's life  
and another's sanity  
she too comes from  
mothers who have had to  
cut their children loose  
give them up to the care  
of un-natural mothers  
and though there was outer distance  
there is always the inner line

so i named you blue  
the deepest blue  
my deepest blues  
and like you  
i knew my mother's mother first

Oma  
i called her  
my grand mother  
tall imposing  
wise eyes  
that reached deep  
and expected much  
i learned lessons  
i did not know i was being taught  
that manners was not meekness  
that there was strength in a smile  
that there was healing in the tears  
of women  
and in the laughter of our men  
  
she died when i was four  
at her funeral they passed me  
over her open grave  
according to the old ways  
it meant that i was the favored one

my first memories of my mother  
were born  
on that day

in my deepest blues  
i wonder  
will you know of the mothers  
in our line that  
gave their children  
to other mothers?  
women who know  
about the presence of love  
over the absence of the body

or will you be  
the sullen girl  
i was  
hardly smiling  
not unhappy  
just blue  
deep blue  
like indygo

blue water  
blue movement  
blue tears  
blue screams

dreams of tidal blue  
washing over me  
washing through me  
leaving me only the echo of  
your name  
economy of letters  
ripe  
bursting with meaning  
indygo child  
a deeper shade of blue  
a deeper shade of blues

now there is Mama  
my mother, your mother's mother  
who has had to give me  
up twice  
her only woman/child  
the moody girl with old eyes  
who prefers the memories of love  
who knows about the presence of love  
and the presence of spirit  
the sullen one whose love  
is unconditional,  
unyielding  
a relentless thing  
whose cycle is a circle not understood

by passersby

and when we two remain  
within the cycle that is  
our circle that is  
our line of mothers  
i will let you go again  
as it has always been  
and you must let me go  
as it must be  
and i will teach you that  
the presence of our love is stronger than  
the absence of my body  
it is our bond  
that is a cycle  
a circle not understood  
by passersby

## bitter water

strange tides  
these days  
fill up my cup  
with bitter water

strange tides linger  
set my home adrift  
rekindle ancestral memories  
me a refugee  
make me a refugee

strange tides simmer  
reluctant to recede  
trapped between a tired sea  
and a seething lake  
swing low sweet chariot  
swing low

strange tides linger  
soaking festered sores  
softening the scabs of dreams deferred  
healing unknown hurts  
all this salt needs a place to go  
and my cup runneth over

strange tides these days  
still     a lullaby  
an ancestral hymn  
wade in the water  
wade in the water

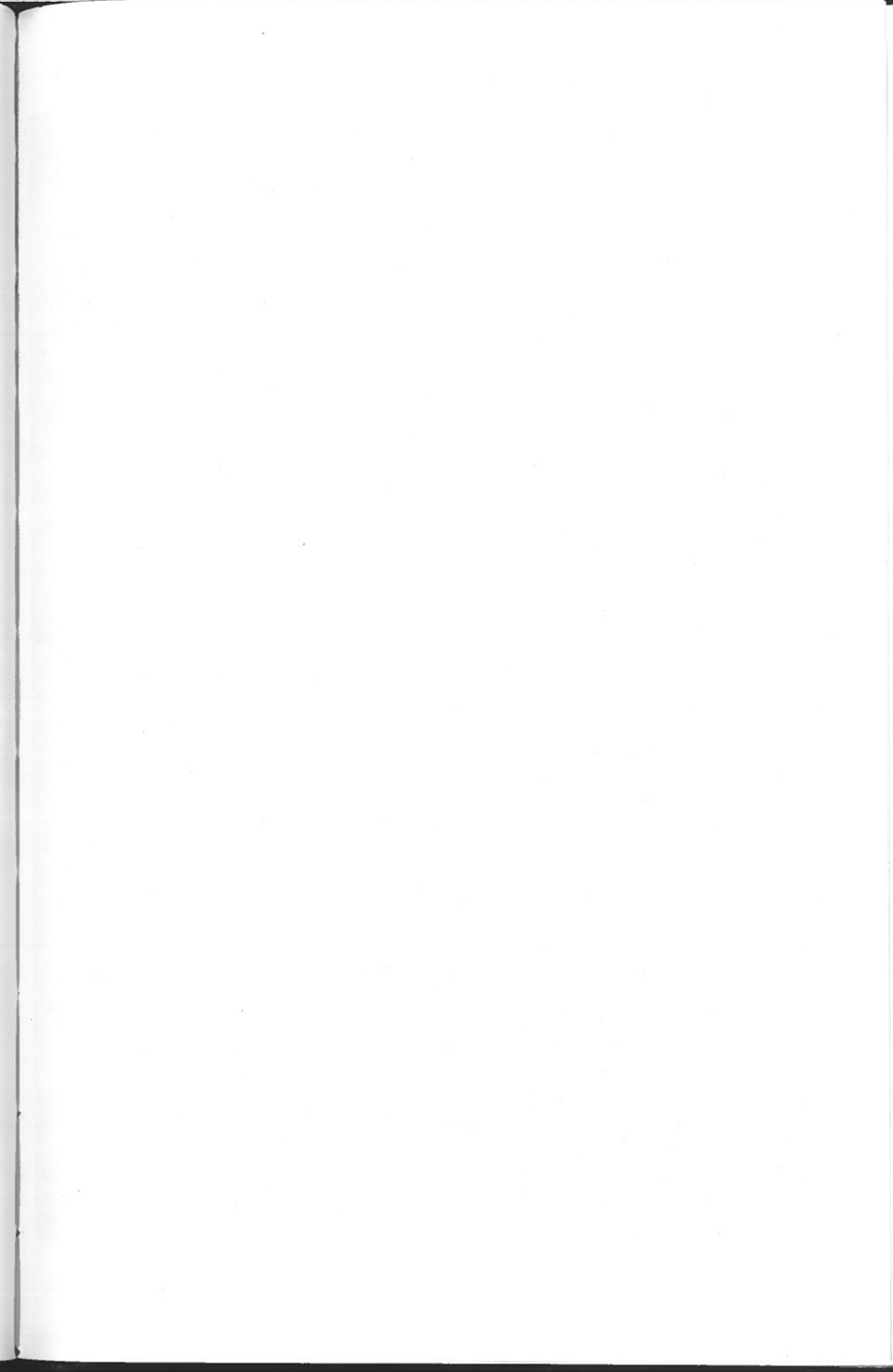
strange tides reach underground  
shifting tectonic plates  
forming new topographies  
with the bones of our young  
suffer the children  
suffer the children

strange tides these days  
wash our dead away  
as it was in the beginning  
street cornered preachers  
shout of sin and lasting days  
Gods gunna trouble the water  
God's gunna trouble the water

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

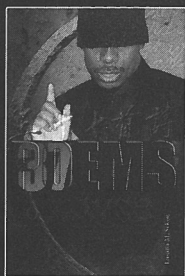
Drisana Deborah Jack was born in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, in 1970, to Caribbean parents. As a child her parents brought her to St. Martin, her mother's home island, where she was reared in Cole Bay village. Jack graduated from SUNY at Buffalo with an MFA in 2002 but by then had already co-founded and acted with the Teenage Acting Company while attending the MPC high school, and published her first poetry book, *The Rainy Season* (1997), in St. Martin. She went on to exhibit her artwork in the Caribbean, the USA, Europe, and Japan. Jack, a Caribbean artist by "geography and cultural/spiritual location, constructs ... a personal/cultural history based on ancestral or re-memory using painting, video, photography, sound art, and poetry." Her poetry has appeared in *The Caribbean Writer* and *Calabash*. Articles citing and reviewing her work have appeared in *Today*, *The St. Maarten Guardian*, *Beurs- en Nieuwsberichten*, *Artpapers Journal*, *Buffalo News*, and in Fabian Badejo's *Salted Tongues – Modern Literature in St. Martin* (2003). Jack has recited her poetry and lectured on the cultural arts at readings and festivals such as No To The Franco-Dutch Treaty, CARIFESTA VI, VII, at the Studio Museum of Harlem, the Miami Bookfair International, Crossing the Seas, Poetry Africa, and Tradewinds. A leading St. Martin poet and mother of one daughter, Jack is an assistant art professor at New Jersey City University. Awards and honors include a Caribbean Writers Institute Fellow (UM), Prince Bernhard Culture Fund and New York Foundation for the Arts grants, SUNY Buffalo Dissertation Fellowship, Photography Institute fellow, Lightwork Artist-in-Residence (Syracuse University), CEPA Exhibition Award, and a US National Endowment for the Arts residency at Big Orbit Gallery. *skin* is Jack's second book of poems.





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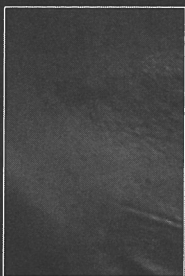
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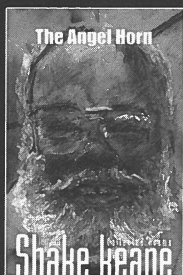
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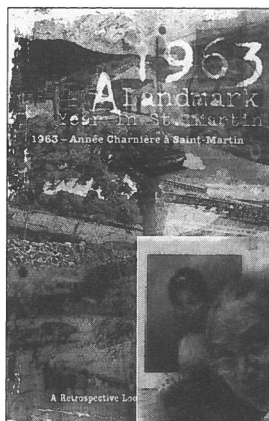
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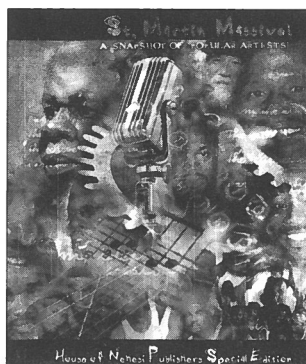
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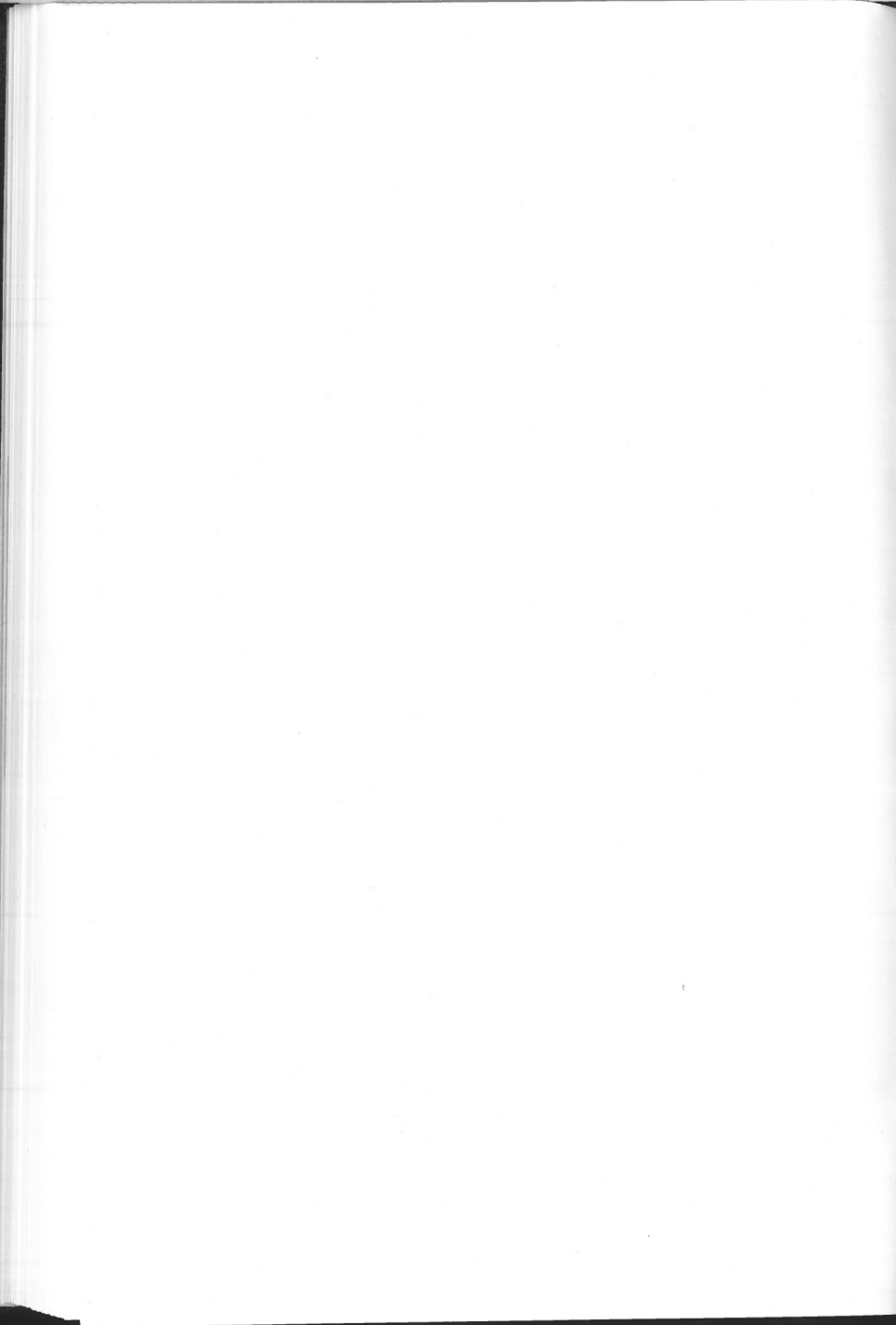
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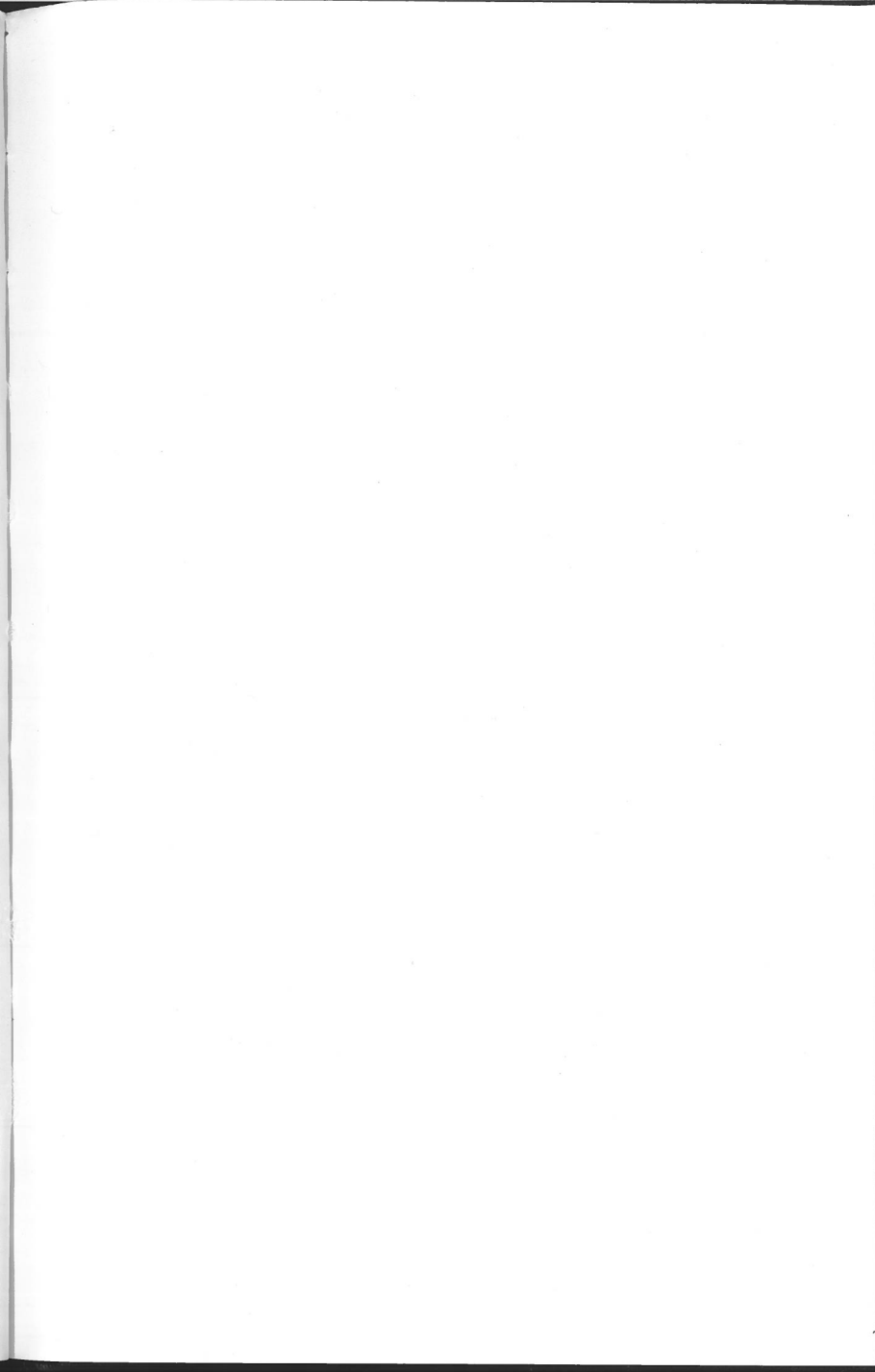
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*State University of New York*



Drisana Deborah Jack is a leading St. Martin poet/artist, "constructing a personal/cultural history based on ancestral or re-memory ... ." Her poetry has appeared in *The Caribbean Writer* and *Calabash*. Jack has recited her poetry and lectured in the Caribbean, USA, and South Africa. The mother of one daughter is currently an assistant professor at New Jersey City University. Awards and honors include a Caribbean Writers Institute Fellow, Prince Bernard Culture Fund grant, and a US National Endowment for the Arts residency at Big Orbit Gallery. *Skin* is Jack's second book of poems.

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